

Spring Birdsong's eternal thanks to local conservationists

BY ANN PRINCE

SPECIAL TO THE CLIPPER

(Continued from last week's Clipper)

While snow still covered our roofs, lawns, and woodlands—hiding sprouting bulbs and unfolding buds—year-round neighborhood chickadees, cardinals, and titmice lyrically voiced their presence, cued by the extended daylight. Soon they were accompanied by eagerly calling March harbingers such as red-winged blackbirds and eastern phoebes. After nine feet of snowfall since January 1, these early sounds of spring in Duxbury were all the more welcome as we observed the snowmelt and sunshine and witnessed the yearly springtime revival. Every cheery note lifted our spirits after the winter of 2015.

The Voses save a bird sanctuary

Six decades ago the threat of silence for lack of birdsong came right to the doorsteps in Duxbury. If not for Olga Owens Huckins, who lived on Powder Point, bird populations of Duxbury and those much farther afield might not have survived. To honor this woman and her activism of behalf of the birds and other creatures, Judi and Terry Vose have conserved a wild parcel in town that was once a small sanctuary for birds and other wildlife owned by Olga and her brother Stuart. Just before the first of the year—and the start of this past winter's record-breaking snowfall—a conservation restriction on the historic property was finalized. Respected environmentalists and longtime residents, the Voses purchased the property in 2010, recognizing it as the place where a movement of universal importance began. The land was once owned by The Nature Conservancy for its protection, but the land was subsequently sold and it returned to private ownership.

Learning that this property was in imminent risk of being developed, the Voses acquired the land. To make certain that preservation was guaranteed, they needed to take one more step. This year, a conservation restriction is now in place, ensuring that this illustrious natural sanctuary, which was also a summer encampment for Native Americans for over 2,000 years, will never be altered even if it changes hands.

1957 Assault on Powder Point Birds

The story of Olga's sanctuary and Silent Spring began in the summer of '57. Huckins watched with dismay as planes spraying DDT and other toxins flew over her sanctuary, which included a vernal pool and small pond abundant with wildlife. The chemicals filling the air and then descending upon the living creatures and their habitat were lethal, killing not only songbirds but also native bees and countless other beneficial flying insects.

The morning after the spraying, Huckins found dead birds beside her back door, next to her birdbath, tumbling from a tree branch in her yard. She dared not look farther because she was "too heartsick to look for corpses." Incredulous, Huckins sent a letter to the editor of The Boston Herald: "Air spraying where it is not needed is inhuman, undemocratic, and probably

unconstitutional,” she wrote. “For those of us who stand helplessly on the tortured earth, it is intolerable.”

A Defining Moment for Modern-Day Environmentalism.

However, it was another letter, penned by Olga Huckins to her friend Rachel Carson, a wildlife biologist and best-selling writer, that activated authorship of a book that would set into motion a series of events sparking the modern environmental movement. Huckins described the disastrous spraying in detail. She then proceeded with a plea for help from Carson, who lived in the Washington DC area where she had lots of influential contacts and former colleagues from the US Fish and Wildlife Service (from which she retired in 1952). Huckins asked Carson to enlist someone to put a stop to the aerial spraying of DDT. Carson then resolved to begin “Silent Spring,” which revealed the damage caused by indiscriminate pesticide use nationwide and its dire consequences for wildlife and humans. Carson’s fundamental message was to make peace with nature. The conviction and facts of her prose produced a new paradigm. “Silent Spring” brought forth the birth of a new awareness that ultimately our attitude toward the land and our fellow creatures will determine our own fate.

Much to the consternation of chemical companies and others who profited from pesticide sale and use, “Silent Spring,” published in September of 1962, was an immediate success. The brilliantly written and meticulously documented book brought to light a sobering message for all citizens to consider—that widespread indiscriminate pesticide dispersal was an insidious killer.

The popularity of “Silent Spring” spread as a series of chapters appeared in The New Yorker. When these articles became a full volume, it was then selected as Book of the Month for October. With recognition of the author and her new book came the opportunity to reach a greater audience. She appeared on The Today Show and testified before President John F. Kennedy’s Science Advisory Board and a US Senate subcommittee. (All the while Carson was writing “Silent Spring” and then disseminating its powerful truth, she was battling breast cancer. She died of the illness a year and a half after the book was published.



Turtles bask in the sunlight on the sanctuary property.